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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

PRESENT RELATIVE SITUATION

OF

GREAT BRITAIN

AND

FRANCE.

November the 16th, 1802.

by

W. Roscoe Esq.

LIVERPOOL,

PRINTED BY J. M'CREERY, HOUGHTON-STREET.

1802.

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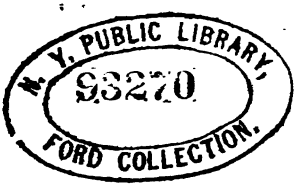

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OBSERVATIONS, &c.

THE present situation of this country exhibits a singular spectacle. After supporting for nearly ten years, a war of unexampled expense, slaughter, and devastation, the necessities and clamours of the people, combining with the remaining good sense of the nation, effected a peace. The preliminaries were agreed on. The ratification in due time followed; and all descriptions of men united in the general satisfaction, excepting an implacable party, who having carried on the war till the appearance of things became desperate, deserted their posts, and left the whole difficulties of a peace, now become necessary, to the present administration.

What then is the occasion of the present commotion, which agitates the kingdom, and seems to indicate a general apprehension of war? Have any new hostilities taken place between this country and France? Has the Chief Consul refused to comply with the terms of the treaty of Amiens? Are any remonstrances known to have passed between the ministers of the two nations? Has the Legislature of this country had an opportunity of expressing an opinion on this momentous

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mentous question? No—This mighty storm has been raised by a few obscure individuals, who, forgetting their proper province of supplying the world with useful information, have modestly assumed to themselves, since the dissolution of parliament, the character of leaders and dictators of the public opinion. These men have had the temerity to declare, that a new war is indispensible—that we ought not to comply with the treaty of Amiens—*that we must cut the gordian knot.* Accustomed to the daily perusal of these prints, the nation has for a moment been led to believe, that there could not exist such vehemence without some cause. A war is spoken of as not unlikely. The public funds have felt a depression; and the people now look up to the meeting of parliament for the unravelling of the mystery.

May we be allowed to ask these self-elected guides of the public opinion, and particularly such of them as have, during the late contest, espoused the cause of the French, what can be the motives of their present conduct? Are they disinterested and patriotic, or are they mercenary and corrupt? We will, for the sake of argument, assume the former supposition; and endeavour, in a few words, to ascertain what substantial grounds exist for the daily incentives to slaughter that issue from the press.

Are we to believe then, that the despotic authority said to be exercised by the first Consul over the people of France, has roused the independent feelings of those who cannot bear to see a great people reduced to slavery? In truth, the French have been particularly unfortunate in conciliating

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conciliating the good opinion of the inhabitants of this country. Before the revolution, we considered them as the abject slaves of a despotic prince, and treated them on all occasions accordingly. When, by an astonishing effort, they threw off the yoke and established a limited monarchy, the general aversion to them increased; as some of our fellow subjects, who expressed an untimely exultation on that occasion, can sufficiently testify. To the monarchy succeeded a republic, which was still more hateful to us; and this was followed by a period of anarchy, of carnage, and of blood, unexampled in the records of mankind, and which for a moment gratified the sanguinary ferocity of those who had predicted, and occasioned it. The various modifications of government which ensued, all equally failed of obtaining our approbation. At length Bonaparte acquired a decided superiority, and extinguished the remaining sparks of opposition. Yet, even now, when the French may be considered as reduced to their pristine state of obedience, we still continue our hostility. Have we then exchanged characters with the French? And shall we avow the principle asserted by them in the heat of the revolution, and which gave such just and extensive offence—that of becoming Champions of Europe, and assisting every nation that chuses to assert its liberties? Or would it not, after the experience we have had, be more consistent with prudence and common sense, to allow the people of France to settle their own affairs with their first Consul, and adopt such form of government as may be agreeable to themselves? Let us leave them to their fate; and whilst we lament their misfortunes, let our philanthropy console itself in the reflection, that

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that it cannot be expected, that ten millions of men, should attempt to make forty millions happy against their will.

But it will perhaps be said, that this is not the real cause of the present outcry against the first Consul. It is not the absolute authority which he has acquired over the French, but his ambitious projects against the rest of Europe, that loudly call for our interference. Let us examine this question. Let us see whether the first Consul has in fact extended his authority since the ratification of the articles of peace, and, if so, whether it be our peculiar province to restrain it.

It is not to be denied, that at the time when the preliminaries of peace were agreed on, the power and influence which the first Consul exercised in Italy, were well known, and tacitly conceded. The assumption of the office of president of the Italian Republic, in the interval between the preliminaries and the ratification of peace, could therefore form no substantial obstacle to the conclusion of the treaty. Holland also remains in the same state as at the conclusion of the peace; acting under the influence, and subject to the controul of the first Consul. These motives of dissatisfaction existed at the time of the treaty with France. If, therefore, we ought on this account to renew hostilities, we ought not to have concluded peace.

But we are told, that the first Consul has crushed the liberties of Switzerland, and is now reducing that unhappy country to the situation of a province of France,

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France, or rather, to that of an advanced post, whence he may annoy the rest of Europe.

This observation may be regarded in two points of view. First—How far it is incumbent on us, in our character of general assertors of the liberties of the world, to take an active part in behalf of the Swiss. Secondly—How far the measure is incumbent on us, in point of prudence and common sense.

A few years since, Austria, Russia, and Prussia, united together to dismember a kingdom, happy under a beloved sovereign, whose authority and government those very powers had pledged themselves to maintain. What part did the magnanimous spirit of this country take in that transaction? It vented a few empty declamations, and left Poland to its fate. Last year the French general Le Clerc, sailed to St. Domingo, and by force of arms reduced the colonies, which had been declared free by the decrees of the French legislature, to their former state of cruel oppression, unrelenting slavery, and the daily discipline of the cart whip. Yet this nation could bear this oppression of their suffering fellow creatures, not only without resentment, but without commiseration; or rather they received the intelligence with satisfaction and delight. What then is this sudden emotion that interests us for the fate of Switzerland? That induces us so pathetically to lament the change that is likely to take place in its government? What know we externally of Switzerland, except that it has for ages been a country that has systematically hired out its inhabitants, for the purpose of bloodshed? Or internally, but that it has been divided

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divided into several governments, many of which were as despotic as any in Europe? Are not the inhabitants themselves at variance as to the form of their government? And is it not this dissension which has afforded the first Consul a pretence of interference. After the iniquities to which we have already closed our eyes, to start at the misfortunes of Switzerland, savours too much of hypocrisy. But the veil is too thin; and it is to be feared that the cause of Switzerland, is only introduced as the pretext, whilst the substantial ground of offence yet remains to be disclosed.

A true modern politician, whilst he smiles with contempt at the idea that either humanity or justice has any thing to do with the concerns of nations, will however assure us, with great seriousness, that we ought not to suffer the encroachments of the first Consul in Switzerland, because they will destroy the balance of power in Europe. Before however we plunge into a war to preserve this balance of power, let us ask ourselves a few questions. Is this country more interested in preserving the balance of power than the nations of the Continent? If Russia, Austria, Spain, and Prussia can permit such aggrandizement, is it the peculiar province of this country to interrupt its tranquillity, and risque its dearest interests, to assist those who are either unable or unwilling to assist themselves? Is it incumbent upon us to enforce the performance of a treaty to which we refused to become parties, and which the parties themselves do not think it necessary to support? Are we not happily separated from the rest of Europe by the ocean that surrounds

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us, and which places us rather as spectators than as actors in the concerns of the Continent? and is it not our true policy rather to secure ourselves, by maintaining a formidable posture of defence both at home and abroad, and to enjoy the advantages of our insular situation, by the extension of our commerce and manufactures, now rapidly reviving, than by plunging into a war, to renew the calamities of the last seven years? In a war of defence, we are able, not only to repel, but to punish the aggressor, whilst by expending our strength in continental warfare, we expose ourselves to the rapacity of the vultures that surround us. The balance of power! who can hitherto determine on which side the beam inclines? Are we not told by these very journalists who raise a cry against the influence of the first Consul, "That the Cabinets "of Europe await their fate from the decision of the "court of Russia?" from Russia! that invulnerable power, which can send forth her barbarian myriads, to the annoyance or subjugation of the world; secure in her immense wilds from every hostile attempt! Is there hitherto any barrier in Europe against the growing strength of this infant Hercules? and is it our business to tear down the only power, that in case of necessity, can oppose it with a prospect of success? In every point of view, whether political or commercial, Russia is also a formidable rival of this country. But shall we on that account think it necessary to proclaim a crusade against her, under the pretext that she must be reduced to her proper standard of equality. That common sense which directs the conduct of mankind in the daily concerns of life, seems to be discarded, when we deliberate on the public relations

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of states and great bodies of people. Before a pugilist commits himself to the event of a battle, he naturally measures the strength of his antagonist, and examines with a critical eye the breadth of his shoulders, and the muscles of his arm; but we are called upon to engage in an offensive war, singly, with an adversary who has baffled our efforts in combination with almost all the powers of Europe, in the hope of accomplishing, unassisted and unsupported, that, which in conjunction with such mighty allies we have attempted in vain. Have we forgotten in how many ways we are vulnerable, and that whilst we are weakening our enemy, we are destroying ourselves?

From these observations we may perhaps be allowed to infer, that no motives, either of humanity, policy, or common sense, can possibly induce this country to plunge itself again into the horrors of war—of war! that scourge of human nature! that creator of widows and orphans! that devourer of the subsistence of the poor! that fruitful source of desolation and blood abroad, and of tears, of misery, and of famine at home! Of war! that national and individual evil; that enemy to social intercourse; which bears upon its brow the curse of God, and raises mankind to a dreadful pre-eminence over the rest of creation, by superior ferocity, brutality, and guilt!

Yet, although the present rage of our daily oracles for the renewal of hostilities with France cannot be justified by either patriotic or political motives, the war-whoop increases in violence, and the public papers, whether under the denomination of ministerial or opposition,

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position, emulate each other in virulence and abuse, against a nation with whom we are professedly at peace.

Hitherto disappointed in our inquiries, we must resort to other motives for the explanation of such conduct. Let us then for a moment trace back the steps by which we have arrived at the precipice on which we now stand; and endeavour to discover how we have been impelled into this region of storms and of tumult, without being conscious of the progress we had made.

It is well known, that on the conclusion of the peace, a disappointed and sanguinary party retired, or rather were dismissed, from the councils of the sovereign. Although weak, both in number and in talents, this party makes up in industry and in vehemence, what it wants in other respects. Zealous disciples of their great apostle, the political fanatic Edmund Burke, they are indefatigable in spreading war and desolation over the face of the earth. Their leading maxim is to brutalize the people at home, in order to render them fit for the sanguinary purposes which they keep unceasingly in view. Their devotion to their blood-stained deity is sincere and ardent. Slaughter and desolation are their sole delight. Like the vulture, they scent carnage at a distance, and feast on the putrid carcases that contaminate the field of death. Such are the men towards whom we are to look for an explanation of our present situation. Let us unravel the thread of their devices. Let us strip the mask from their features. Let us disclose to the nation the extent of their

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their views; and, whatever may be the event, let us combat these enemies of their species in open day.

No sooner had the celebration of peace spread joy throughout the two nations, than the self-elected dictators of the day, availing themselves of the freedom of the British press, began to animadvert on the internal concerns of France, and the conduct of the first Consul, in a strain little calculated to promote the good understanding of the two countries. This species of attack naturally gave rise to recriminations, and these afforded our patriotic and irritable countrymen, a pretext for the most unlimited abuse. The first Consul was a tyrant and a despot, and the people of France were called upon, in no ambiguous terms, to free themselves from their oppressor, either by secret treachery, or open violence.

Whatever may be the nature of a government, incitements to revolt and to assassination cannot be allowed to be circulated within its territories, for this would be to commit a political *felo de se*. The importation of British newspapers was of course prohibited in France. From this period the editors set no bounds to their invectives and their abuse. They affected to consider the prohibition as a triumph; as a mark of the superiority of their arguments, and as a proof of the high privileges of the British press.

Disappointed in their hopes of exciting internal commotions in France, they raised the cry of war; and have endeavoured, by every argument which resentment could fabricate, to urge this country to an hostile

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hostile attack. If we may believe these crusaders, there is not a man to be met with, who will now dare to avow a different opinion. Although with a hesitation which marks their folly, whilst it betrays their fears, they candidly own, there may be some doubt as to the *expediency* of a war at the present moment.

We have spoken of the freedom of the British press. What is this freedom? Is it the liberty of assuming the organ of the public voice, to abuse and vilify in the grossest terms, any government in Europe, which may not have the good fortune to be honoured with the approbation of these enlightened judges? Whilst laws and manners regulate the intercourse of private life, are states and nations to be aspersed without decency, and without reserve? The liberty of speech is an invaluable privilege, as well as the liberty of the press; but if the liberty of speech be used to raise dissensions between neighbours, there are regulations by which it may be restrained; and shall no regulations subsist to curb that outrageous spirit of insult, which arms nation against nation, and may desolate the world with blood?

Let any Englishman ask himself, what would be his feelings, were the French, or any other people, to dictate to us the forms of our government, or endeavour, by convincing us, that we were slaves, to incite us to insurrection and to tumult? Not that observations on other governments are to be restricted, if made with that enlightened spirit of candour and good will, which evinces an interest in the happiness of the people, who may be the object of such remarks, and if calculated

to

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to derive from the consideration of different forms of government, maxims of importance for the benefit of the world at large; but who will say that this has been the case with the editors of the British papers? Or who can deny, that their objects have been to desolate a country, with whom we are professedly at peace, by raising a civil war within it, and attacking it by open arms without.

Let us then acknowledge, that this outrage on public decorum, is not to be attributed to the liberty, but the licentiousness of the press. The nature of which is as different, as light and darkness. The liberty of the press! that palladium of our rights, that boast of Englishmen, that friend of virtue, that corrector of vice, sees in the licentiousness of the press, its worst and most dangerous enemy. Experience indeed has shewn, that it is the destiny of all liberty, to perish by being carried to extremes, and the true enemies of the liberty of the press, are those who abuse it to the purposes of party, of personal feelings, or of national resentment. It has been said, that united remonstrances have been made by different powers of Europe, against the licence in which our printers have indulged themselves. Every Englishman will agree that the united powers of Europe, ought not to be allowed to alter an iota of the British laws, or the British constitution. But it may be well to consider, whether such laws, as they now exist, may not repress the flippant insolence of those who sport with the dearest interests of a nation, and endeavour with all their zeal, to involve the country in a war. Against proceedings of this nature, courts of law have not shut their doors; and

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and if these incendiaries persevere in their offence, the character of the nation loudly requires that they should feel the effects of their temerity.

Such however have been, and such yet appear to be, the ready instruments of that party, which yet dares to look forward towards the direction of the affairs of this country. The long suspension of parliament has been favourable to their views. Through the mercenary medium of the public prints, they have breathed contagion through the land. With unwearied perseverance they have arrogantly insinuated, that the present ministers are unequal to the task which they have undertaken, and have endeavoured to raise a storm, in order to terrify the Pilot from the helm. But the good sense of the people, has already begun to recover itself from its surprize; and the nation is aware of the bold and insidious attack, made upon its character and its repose. The remembrance of the distresses to which the country was reduced by the conduct of the late administration, will be a sufficient pledge against their again obtaining their dangerous ascendancy. The will of the Sovereign, and the voice of the people are happily united, and the judicious and conciliating measures of the present minister, have given the nation an assurance, that such a system is likely to be adopted, as will tend to the true welfare of the country, to the encouragement of manufactures, of commerce, and of agriculture, and ultimately restore us to that state of prosperity, of which we have been awhile deprived, by the effects of the late expensive and destructive war.

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If however in the course of events, we should be called upon once more to take an active part in an hostile struggle, let us before we engage in it, seriously consider both the alleged cause, and the probable event; and let us meet it with our strength unbroken, and our honour untainted; but insulated as we are, let us not be the first to plunge into a contest in which we have little to gain, and much to lose. Let the governments of the Continent take the lead, at least, in adjusting the due counterpoise which is to support the tranquillity of Europe; and if dissentions should arise, and we are called upon to interfere, let it first be in the dignified character of an arbiter, rather than in that of an auxiliary, and an ally.

Such is the policy which ought to have directed this country on a former occasion. By this conduct we should have been regarded as the pacificators of Europe, and should have poured through Britain the commerce and the riches of the world. Such is the high destination of this country; and they who would sacrifice it, either to *a war of words*, or to *the views of a faction*, cannot be the friends either of that country, or of mankind.

THE END.

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